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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of past and concurrent family conflict on adolescents' attitudes toward marriage and behavior in dating relationships. Participants were 75 adolescents who were part of a 7-year project that began when they were in fifth grade. Over 95 percent of their families were of European-American origin, with diversity in socioeconomic levels and family structures represented. The average age of the target adolescents was about 19 years at this follow-up. Data were collected using the following instruments: (1) Dyadic Adjustment Scale; (2) Marital Disagreement Subscale; (3) Marital Dissatisfaction Subscale; (4) family self-report of family conflict; and (5) Survey of Attitudes and Behaviors in Intimate Relationships. Findings suggested that female adolescents place more importance on marriage than male adolescents. An interaction between gender and marital conflict in the fifth grade was also found, indicating that higher levels of marital conflict negatively affect females' attitude toward marriage but not males'. Family conflict in the fifth and twelfth grades was significantly related to adolescents' intolerance for disagreements in dating relationships. Male adolescents' negative interactions in dating relationships were significantly related to fifth grade marital conflict. Contrary to the hypothesis, fifth and twelfth grade family conflict was positively correlated with showing positive regard in dating relationships. (Contains 10 references and 7 tables.) (KDFB)

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The Effects of Family Conflict on Adolescents' Dating Behaviors and Attitudes Toward Marriage: A Longitudinal Study

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the effects of past and concurrent family conflict on adolescents' attitude toward marriage and behavior in dating relationships. Participants were 75 adolescents who were part of a seven year project that began when they were in the fifth grade. Findings suggest that female adolescents place more importance on marriage than male adolescents. An interaction between gender and marital conflict in the 5th grade was also found, indicating that higher levels of marital conflict negatively affect females' attitude toward marriage. Family conflict in the 5th and 12th grades was significantly related to adolescents' intolerance for disagreement in dating relationships. Additionally, male adolescents' negative interactions in dating relationships were significantly related to 5th grade marital conflict. Contrary to the hypothesis, 5th and 12th grade family conflict was significantly positively correlated with showing positive regard in dating relationships. It appears that both past and concurrent family conflict affects female adolescents' attitude toward marriage, as well as some aspects of behavior in dating relationships for both males and females.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time of new experiences and new emotions. It is often a time of first dates, first crushes, and first loves. However, there can be a great deal of variation in adolescents' attitude toward marriage and in their behavior in dating relationships.

Attitudes Toward Marriage

Past research examining attitudes toward marriage among adolescents from divorced and intact families has found mixed results. Some studies have demonstrated that adolescents from divorced families express less desire to marry than their peers from intact families. Other research has indicated that adolescents from divorced families value marriage as much as their nondivorced peers, but report that they are more apprehensive and cautious about marriage. Overall, the findings have been inconsistent.

It may be marital and family conflict, rather than family structure, that best predicts attitudes toward marriage. Although few studies have examined the effects of conflict on adolescents' attitudes toward marriage, the findings have generally been consistent. With few exceptions, these studies have shown that marital and family conflict are associated with adolescents' negative attitudes toward marriage and a desire to postpone marriage. However, much of this research has been criticized for the use of retrospective measures of conflict.

Behavior in Dating Relationships

Family structure and conflict have also been found to relate to earlier onset of adolescent dating and sexual relationships. However, little, if any, research has examined whether family and marital conflict affect the quality of adolescents' behavior in dating relationships. It is possible that children learn how to behave in dating relationships by watching the interactions that take place between members of their own family, and that both past and present levels of conflict within the marital relationship, and within the family as a whole, could affect their behavior in dating relationships.

The present study is part of a longitudinal follow-up that initially examined family factors related to children's adjustment in middle school. It explores the ways that marital and family conflict affect both adolescents' attitude toward marriage and their behavior in dating relationships.

HYPOTHESES

1. Adolescents from families with higher levels of conflict will place less importance on marriage than those from families with lower levels of conflict.

2. Adolescents from families with higher levels of conflict will report fewer adaptive behaviors in their dating relationships than those from families with lower levels of conflict.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 75 adolescents (35 males and 40 females) who, along with their families, were part of a seven year longitudinal study that began when they were in the fifth grade. Over 95% of the families were of European-American background. Socioeconomic levels varied greatly, ranging from very low to upper middle income. Family structure was fairly diverse, with 48% of the adolescents living in intact biological families, and 52% living in divorced, never married, or reconstituted families. Five of the adolescents had children of their own at the time of the current follow-up. The majority of the participants recently graduated from high school, and approximately 40% are now in college. Those not in college have chosen alternative paths, such as joining the work force, joining the armed forces, or studying to earn a GED. The average age of target children was 10.5 years initially, and 18.85 years at the current follow-up.

Measures

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)

The DAS is a 32 item questionnaire that assesses the quality of the marital relationship. For the purposes of this study, two subscales, Dyadic Consensus and Dyadic Satisfaction, were reversed scored to represent Marital Disagreement and Marital Dissatisfaction, respectively indicating the areas and amount of marital conflict experienced when the target child was in the fifth grade. For the version used here, higher scores represents higher levels of disagreement and dissatisfaction.

This measure was administered to the parenting adults in all two-adult families; step-fathers and parenting partners will hereafter be referred to as "father". Additionally, the relationship between the adults is referred to as "marital", although some of the couples were not married. Mother's and father's scores on the two subscales were averaged to create combined measures of disagreement and dissatisfaction. Earlier analyses revealed that the combined scores of marital conflict were better predictors of child outcomes than either of the individual scores.

Marital Disagreement Subscale

The Marital Disagreement scale contains 13 items that ask the respondent to rate the approximate amount of agreement or disagreement, on a six point scale (from always agree to always disagree), in certain areas of marriage. Examples of these items include:

Handling family finances

Making major decisions

Leisure time interests and activities

Ways of dealing with parents or in-laws

Aims, goals, and things believed important

Marital Dissatisfaction Subscale

The Marital Dissatisfaction scale contains 10 items that assess dissatisfaction within the relationship, and the amount of conflict experienced. The items are rated on a six point scale ranging from "never" to "all of the time". Examples of these items include:

How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?

How often do you and your partner quarrel?

In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?

Family Self-Report: Conflict

A modified version of Bloom's self-report of family functioning was completed in both the fifth and twelfth grade by the mother, father, and target child. This Family Self-Report contains a five item Conflict subscale that was used to assess the amount of family conflict experienced by the target child. The items are rated on a four point scale from "very untrue for our family" to "very true for our family." Within-family scores were averaged to get a combined family conflict score; a higher score indicates greater levels of conflict. Examples of items from the Conflict subscale include:

We fight a lot in our family

Family members hardly ever lose their tempers

Family members sometimes hit each other

Survey of Attitudes and Behaviors in Intimate Relationships (SABIR)

The SABIR was developed specifically for the purposes of this research. This measure is a 42 item questionnaire designed to assess adolescents' adaptive and maladaptive behavior in dating relationships. Adolescents first indicated whether or not they had ever been in an exclusive dating relationship. If they had not been in an exclusive dating relationship, the instructions requested that they answer the questions according to how they imagined they would behave in a dating relationship. The items are rated on a four point scale ranging from "never, or almost never" to "very often".

The SABIR contains seven subscales: Positive Regard; Open Communication; Supportiveness; Intolerance for Disagreement; Mutuality of Interests; Negative Interactions; and Nonresolution of Conflict. On four of the subscales (Positive Regard, Open Communication, Supportiveness, and Mutuality of Interests) a higher score represents more positive behaviors. For the remaining three subscales (Intolerance for Disagreement, Negative Interactions, and Nonresolution of Conflict) a higher score indicates more negative behaviors. Four items were reversed scored so that the direction was consistent with the overall scoring on individual subscales.

A cover sheet attached to the questionnaire also included an item asking the respondents to rate how important it was that they be married at some point in the future. This item was used as an indicator of the adolescents' attitude toward marriage. Reliability and validity data for the SABIR are currently being established.

SABIR SUBSCALES

Positive Regard

I compliment my boy/girlfriend on his/her positive qualities

I openly show affection to him/her

Open Communication

I talk over my personal problems and decisions with him/her

I feel comfortable crying in front of him/her

Supportiveness

I encourage him/her in the things he/she wants to accomplish

I comfort him/her when he/she needs it

Intolerance for Disagreement

When we disagree I worry that it might cause damage to our relationship

I get upset if he/she does not see things my way

Mutuality of Interests

I agree with his/her philosophies and viewpoints

I like to do the same things that he/she likes to do

Negative Interactions

I criticize some aspects of his/her appearance

I get angry or annoyed at him/her

Non-Resolution of Conflict

After an argument I try to calmly discuss our disagreements (reverse scored)

I ignore him/her after an argument

RESULTS

Differences in adolescents' attitude toward marriage and behavior in dating relationships, as predicted by past marital conflict, and past and concurrent family conflict, were examined. All adolescents who indicated that they had never been in an exclusive dating relationship were excluded from analyses involving the SABIR. Initial correlations were run between all predictor and outcome variables. Significant correlational findings are reported for males and females in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Hierarchical multiple regressions were then performed between variables that were significantly correlated ($p < .1$). The predictor variable (one of the 4 measures of conflict) and gender were entered on the first step to allow for an investigation of main effects. A predictor X gender interaction term was entered on the second step of the regression. Test of significance for predicted findings are one-tailed.

5th Grade Marital Disagreement and Marital Dissatisfaction
Attitude Toward Marriage

The results of the analyses revealed a significant effect of gender. An inspection of the correlations showed that females placed more importance on being married at some point in the future than did males. In addition, a significant interaction emerged between adolescent gender and attitude toward marriage in relation to both measures of parents' marital conflict seven years earlier. Females from families with higher levels of marital conflict placed less importance on being married at some point in the future than females from families with lower levels of marital conflict. This finding supports hypothesis 1, which predicted that adolescents from families with higher levels of marital conflict would place less importance on marriage. These results are summarized in Table 3.

5th Grade Marital Disagreement and Marital Dissatisfaction Behavior in Dating Relationships

As had been predicted in hypothesis 2, for both males and females, higher parental scores on the Marital Dissatisfaction subscale were significantly related to adolescents' Intolerance for Disagreement scores. The higher the level of their parents' marital dissatisfaction seven years earlier, the less tolerant adolescents were of disagreement in their own dating relationships. Furthermore, there was an interaction between earlier marital conflict and gender in relation to scores on the Negative Interactions subscale of the SABIR. Adolescent males whose parents reported more marital conflict seven years earlier tended to report higher levels of negative feelings and interactions in their dating relationships. The results for theses regression equations are summarized in Tables 4 and 5.

5th and 12th Grade Family Conflict

There was no relationship between family conflict and attitude toward marriage. However, as predicted in hypothesis 2, family conflict at both points in time was significantly related to adolescents' scores on the Intolerance for Disagreement subscale of the SABIR. Both males and females from families with higher levels of conflict reported greater intolerance for disagreement in their dating relationships. The results for these regressions are summarized in Table 6

Contrary to predictions, 5th and 12th grade family conflict were significantly positively related to the Positive Regard subscale. This effect, which was found for both males and females, indicates that the higher the level of family conflict, the more positive regard adolescents tended to report showing towards their dating partners. The results for these regressions are summarized in Table 7.

CONCLUSION

These results suggest that early and concurrent marital and family conflict affect some aspects of adolescents' attitude toward marriage and their behavior in dating relationships. It was found that females, in general, placed more importance on being married at some point in the future than did males. The hypothesis that higher levels of conflict would produce a less favorable attitude toward marriage was supported for females, but not for males. This finding suggests that the effects of marital conflict on adolescents' attitude toward marriage differ for males and females. Previous research has found that females put more emphasis on relationships than males. This may make adolescent females sensitive to high levels of conflict within their own parents' marital relationship, and lead them to place less importance on being married in the future.

The hypothesis that adolescents from families with higher levels of conflict would have less adaptive behaviors in dating relationships was partially supported. Both males and females who experienced higher levels of family and marital conflict at home tended to report a greater intolerance for disagreement in their own dating relationships. Additionally, adolescent males from families with higher levels of marital conflict tended to report more negative interactions in their dating relationships. These findings suggest that adolescents from homes with high levels of marital and family conflict might model their parents' maladaptive interaction patterns in their own dating relationships. One explanation for the gender interaction between marital conflict and the Negative Interactions subscale is that the behaviors measured in this subscale tend to be vocally critical. Traditional gender roles generally discourage females from exhibiting these types of vocally critical behaviors.

Contrary to hypothesis 2, adolescents from more conflictual families tended to also report that they showed greater amounts of positive regard toward their dating partners. Perhaps these adolescents demonstrated more positive regard toward their own partners in order to receive the appreciation and affection that may have infrequently communicated in their families. Since it is likely that these adolescents are not learning these positive behaviors by modeling their own parent's behaviors, it would be interesting to investigate how this behavior

develops. However, it is important to remember that the adolescents from higher conflict families also have a greater intolerance for disagreement. They may be increasing their positive regard behaviors specifically to avoid conflict and disagreement within their own dating relationships.

It was surprising that Intolerance for Disagreement, Negative Interactions, and Positive Regard were the only three subscales of the SABIR that were significantly related to marital and family conflict. The SABIR is a new instrument, and reliability and validity are currently being established. It is hoped that those data will be helpful in fine-tuning the subscales, and increasing the usefulness of this measure. However, despite the present status of the SABIR, the effects were strong enough to show that both marital and family conflict, as reported by family members when the target child was in the 5th grade, are powerful predictors of adolescent perspectives and behaviors seven years later.

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Table 1

Significant Correlations of Marital and Family Conflict with Adolescent Males' Dating Behaviors

	12TH GRADE DATING BEHAVIORS		
	Positive[1] Regard	Intolerance for Disagreement	Negative Interactions
FAMILY AND MARITAL CONFLICT			
5th Grade Marital Disagreement (N=24)			.36**
5th Grade Marital Dissatisfaction (N=24)			.37**
5th Grade Family Conflict (N=32)	.32*		
12th Grade Family Conflict (N=32)		.48***	

*p < .1 **p < .05 ***p < .01 (one-tailed) [1] Probability estimate is two-tailed for unpredicted finding

Table 2

Significant Correlations of Marital and Family Conflict with Adolescent Females' Attitude Toward Marriage and Dating Behaviors

	12TH GRADE ATTITUDE AND DATING BEHAVIOR		
FAMILY AND MARITAL CONFLICT	Importance of Marriage	Positive[1] Regard	Mutuality of Interests
5th Grade Marital Disagreement (N=29)	$-.57^{****}$		
5th Grade Marital Dissatisfaction (N=29)	$-.49^{***}$		
5th Grade Family Conflict (N=32)		$.36^{**}$	
12th Grade Family Conflict (N=32)		$.40^{**}$	$.33^{*}$

$^{*}p < .1$ $^{**}p < .05$ $^{***}p < .01$ $^{****}p < .001$ (one-tailed) [1] Probability estimate is two-tailed for unpredicted finding

Table 3

Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of 5th Grade Marital Conflict on Adolescents' Attitude Towards Marriage

VARIABLE	BETA	R	R^2	R^2 CHANGE
STEP 1: Marital Disagreement	- .10			
Gender	- 2.1 ****			
Statistics Step 1		.24	.06	
STEP 2: Marital X Gender	- 2.3 ****			
Statistics Step 2		.49	.24	.18****
STEP 1: Marital Dissatisfaction	- .19*			
Gender	- 1.8***			
Statistics Step 1		.19	.04	
STEP 2: Marital X Gender	- 1.9***			
Statistics Step 2		.41	.17	.13***

*p < .1 **p < .05 ***p < .01 ****p < .001 (one-tailed)

Table 4

Hierarchical Multiple Regression of 5th Grade Marital Dissatisfaction on Intolerance for Disagreement in Dating Relationships

VARIABLE	BETA	R	R^2	R^2 CHANGE
STEP 1: Marital Dissatisfaction	.31***			
Gender	.92			
Statistics Step 1		.29	.08	
STEP 2: Marital X Gender	.90			
Statistics Step 2		.34	.11	.03

***p < .01 (one-tailed)

Table 5

Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of 5th Grade Marital Conflict on Negative Interactions in Dating Relationships

VARIABLE	BETA	R	R^2	R^2 CHANGE
STEP 1: Marital Disagreement	.15			
Gender	- .90			
Statistics Step 1		.23	.05	
STEP 2: Marital X Gender	- 1.11*			
Statistics Step 2		.31	.09	.04*
STEP 1: Marital Dissatisfaction	.12			
Gender	- .72			
Statistics Step 1		.25	.06	
STEP 2: Marital X Gender	- . 95*			
Statistics Step 2		.31	.10	.03*

*p < .1 (one-tailed)

Table 6

Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of Family Conflict on Intolerance for Disagreement in Dating Relationships

FAMILY CONFLICT	BETA	R	R^2	R^2 CHANGE
STEP 1: 5th Grade Conflict	.30***			
Gender	- .38			
Statistics Step 1		.29	.09	
STEP 2: Conflict X Gender	.33			
Statistics Step 2		.30	.09	.00
STEP 1: 12th Grade Conflict	.32***			
Gender	.36			
Statistics Step 1		.31	.10	
Step 2: Conflict X Gender	- .37			
Statistics Step 2		.34	.11	.01

***p < .01 (one-tailed)

Table 7

Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of Family Conflict on Positive Regard in Dating Relationships

FAMILY CONFLICT	BETA	R	R^2	R^2 CHANGE
STEP 1: 5th Grade Conflict	.23*			
Gender	.02			
Statistics Step 1		.24	.06	
STEP 2: Conflict X Gender	- .13			
Statistics Step 2		.24	.06	.00
STEP 1: 12th Grade Conflict	.20*			
Gender	- .11			
Statistics Step 1		.21	.04	
STEP 2: Conflict X Gender	.04			
Statistics Step 2		.21	.04	.00

*p < .1 (two-tailed)